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SUBJECT: THE LOW-DOWN ON TAJIKISTAN'S LAW ON RELIGION

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Tajikistan's draft law on religion does not appear to be on the fast track any longer. Government officials will revise the current draft, and it is unlikely that the proposed law will not be considered by parliament until next year. While future drafts may take into account some of the concerns expressed by religious groups and non-governmental organizations, we predict the government will still continue to exert severe restrictions on religious freedom. End summary.

Another Conference

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¶2. (U) On 21 November 2007, PolOff attended an OSCE-sponsored round table on the draft law on religion. The meeting was essentially a reprise of a November 7 conference (reftel), in which religious groups and non-governmental organizations were given an opportunity to voice their opinions about the draft. OSCE brought in Gerhard Robbers, a member of ODIHR's Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief, to speak about general concerns regarding the draft law. Robbers spoke very cautiously, emphasizing the need for a cooperative arrangement with the government.

¶3. (U) The only senior member of the Government to attend, Saimurod Fattoev, President Rahmon's State Advisor on Political and Social Issues, departed before the floor was opened for public discussion. A representative of the Ministry of Culture took notes, but he was not in a position to speak authoritatively about the government's plans for future drafts.

Taking the Draft Law Off the Front Burner

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¶4. (SBU) PolOff spoke to Abdullo Rahnomo, a researcher at the Government-sponsored Center for Strategic Research, on the margins of the OSCE round table. Rahnomo has become a respected analyst on religious affairs, and is in a position to speak credibly on the government's agenda. Rahnomo said that, as a result of the November 7 conference, the government downgraded the urgency of passing the new law on religion and is now treating the law as a normal piece of legislation. The government will likely not submit the draft to parliament until next year.

¶5. (SBU) Rahnomo further added that government officials will

revise the current draft and amend some of the more problematic provisions that have been criticized by religious groups and non-governmental organizations. He said in particular that the prohibition on political parties having a religious affiliation will be amended or removed.

¶6. (SBU) Rahnamo cautioned that these developments represent a minor shift in tactics by the government, as opposed to a significant shift in policy. The government will likely use the November 7 and 21 meetings to claim that there has been a transparent, consultative drafting process. Government policy is still aimed at exerting control over all aspects of religious life, and the government will find other ways to limit the political activities of the Islamic Renaissance Party.

Keeping the Fire Going

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¶7. (SBU) OSCE representatives also indicated to PolOff that the government has not yet officially requested an ODIHR review of the draft law. OSCE has been seeking such a request as a mechanism for meaningful engagement with the government on the issue. While OSCE has been waiting for this request, embassy requested that a local partner of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law review the draft law. In lieu of ODIHR's official participation, OSCE and other interested organizations will be able to use the International Center's analysis as a means of intervention with government officials.

Observations/Comment

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¶8. (SBU) Comment: Efforts to confront the government on the draft law of religion have yielded a short term positive result. The next draft of the law will likely contain some improvements, but it will not constitute a capitulation to religious groups and non-governmental organizations. OSCE

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deserves a lot of credit for raising the profile of the issue, but Robbers' comments indicate that the organization will take a very cautious approach from this point on. End comment.  
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